

Part II: "The Harper's Quest"

by Tallin

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Summary: A continuation of the previous part. The story of a harper, a hero and Death.

Part II: "The Harper's Quest"

Chapter 7 - A Look Ahead

Quiltan materialized and noticed the headache he had a few moments ago was gone. Examining the area around him, he saw to his right there was a fountain feeding a small pool, the fountain head seemed to resemble a Greek tragedy mask. To his left was what looked like the remains of another fountain, though it now had a tree growing in it. Directly in front of him, surrounded by crumbling pillars, was a one of the most realistic statues he had ever seen. It seemed so real, in fact, that he almost believed it was, though it was too pale to be alive. He realized he was standing in front of the Oracle of Delphi, the mythical Sibyl, herself. Assuming the Guardian had sent him here to learn future and knowing well the Myths of this area, he decided to toss a coin into the pool. As he watched it sink slowly to the bottom that had seemed so near, the statue was surrounded by a glow and came to life. With a voice almost musical, the Sibyl pronounced:

"Welcome, Harper. Master of Music and Words.

"I am the Sibyl, who sees what is to come. Hear now the future that fate brings you.

"Your way is clouded by magic and power. Death is imperiled and fights for its own.

"The Mysterious One will reveal itself finally, When in this One's hands lies the Power it seeks. If the Staff is released under the Conveyor of Spirits, Then the Master of Mystery will be Master of All.

"The Finder of Facts will bring light to the Mystery. The once-Master of Dark provides hope for all souls.

"Now find in yourself the only True Music. Use then wood that music provides. String then the Harp to play the True Music, Or all will be subject to Death in Life's thrall.

"Your way is surrounded by sorrow and grief, Find the now the Music and Love will prevail.

"This is the fate that awaits you."

The glow came again and the Sibyl returned to its former state. Quiltan didn't know what to make of it, he understood very little of it. He assumed the Staff was the Staff in his hand, and what was said about it seemed very similar to what the Guardian had told him. But what was the True Music? And how was he supposed to find it in himself? He could only assume he would find it when he was ready, at least he hoped he would.

Remembering where he was, he was reminded of the grove of Dryads that also inhabited this isle. That was something he had always wanted to see, so using a map he had picked up from Wolfie, he found these enchanted woods.

Looking around he was awed by the beauty of the human-like trees. He sat on a nearby rock and seemed to hear a song on the breeze as it flowed by him. It was beautiful and yet at the same time very sad. He could not help but pull out his harp and try to play it aloud. At first he had a hard time in mimicking it, but finally he was able to get the melody. His music and the music on the wind seemed to combine, as if from one instrument.

Then he felt the tree nymphs awake and heard their beautiful voices as the harmonized with the music he played upon the harp. With the song of the Dryads the music was still sad, but seemed also exciting. Quiltan could no longer sit down. As he stood, the spirits of the trees seemed to almost materialize around him. He danced with them, playing as he did so, the harp strapped around his neck.

He had no idea how long he danced like this, it could have been days, it could have been years. He didn't remember when it had ended, but only knew it had when he woke up on the grass. Even then, he did not think it was a dream, because, not only was it too vivid, but as he woke he noticed his own harp was gone, and beside him was a gift from the Dryads. It was wood, shaped perfectly to be made into a new harp. The grain was faultless, without even the smallest knot. It was smoother than even the most highly polished wood and had just the right weight and density for the perfect acoustics. But more than that, he could feel the power it contained within it, he could tell it was magical.

Feeling well rested and seeing nothing else to do, Quiltan decided he had best return to Silmaria. He activated the mystic magnet and returned again to the palace.

* * *

As Tallin regained consciousness, the first thing he noticed was the smell of flowers and the feeling of warmth on his face. He opened his

eyes, and bright light assaulted them. He turned away and as his eyes cleared, he noticed a duller light coming through the other windows. He supposed the sun was just rising and thus was shining directly through the east windows. Looking out the window, he saw the beautiful trees, the leaves dark green as if it was the height of summer. Tears sprang to his eyes, not because of the beauty or even the brightness he had experienced a moment before, but because he knew where he was, and it brought back all his pain.

Staring out the windows, tears blurring his vision, he was not surprised to hear the voice of Erana.

"I am glad to see you are awake. You were near unto death, even as I found you and teleported you here. The poison in your body would have killed you within minutes." She didn't say this so he would be grateful to her, he knew this. She felt it was her responsibility to help where she could, but he could also hear in her voice the love she had for him, the love that she knew he did not return. It only made him feel worse.

"I can feel you have changed much since we last met. You have given up the way of deceit and trickery for the Way of Honor. You should talk to Rakeesh about the obtaining a sword."

He was about to reply that he had not changed at all, but realized that he had. He no longer wished to get rich off of other people's hard work, he no longer wanted to steal what he got. He had put the needs of others above his own when he had gone to Mordavia instead of trying to find another way to save Katrina. He had never thought about it, but he guessed that he had discovered the Way of Honor. Nonetheless, he replied: "I don't want to be a Paladin. I don't want a sword, either. I don't even know how to use one." He remembered when he had tried to use the sword he had picked up off a mercenary. It had been too heavy on the end, much different in balance than the daggers he usually used, and as he had tried swinging it, he had done more damage to himself than to his enemy.

"Nevertheless, you are already a Paladin, and have probably noticed yourself acquiring abilities you did not have before. After each honorable deed, you have the chance of gaining even more."

As Tallin thought about this, it made sense. He remembered feeling strange when he had decided to give up the throne in favour of Elsa, he realized now that he knew two ways of healing, through magic and with the energy within him. He also remembered how he had sensed the danger in the throne room with Ferrari. Still, he had never heard of a Paladin without a sword, but he guessed he would be the first.

Trying to get up, he found that he lacked the strength.

"Even with my healing, you are still weak, and the poison is not entirely gone from your body." A cup appeared, floating, in front of him. "Here, drink this." He felt his back lifted up, till he was sitting upright, than the cup moved to his lips, he smelled the strong scent of cinnamon, blended with the milder aroma of apples. He drank it as it tilted to pour into his mouth. It tasted something like apple cider, and he found he liked it. He felt stronger, but also felt extremely tired. As he was lowered back to the bed, his eyes closed and he fell fast asleep.

* * *

Rakeesh walked through the portal created by his wife, and was greeted by the King, Elsa and Logos, his old friend. He waited as that portal disappeared and was replaced by another created by the Enchantress Aziza. The Sultan, Tallin's surrogate father, walked through this one. They greeted one another as the old friends they were. With the Sultan came the one who always travelled with him and translated his often hard to understand words, Ja'AFar. The Sultan then turned to Elsa and Logos and greeted them, then told them the news Aziza had given him, then Ja'AFar translated:

"Aziza has been unable to penetrate a powerful scrying shield placed over Trassia, and has also been unable to find any sign of the Prince and the Harper."

Elsa nodded her head and told them that Shakra and Erasmus were having similar problems, though Quiltan had arrived in the Palace this morning. Rakeesh then reported that Kreesha was also experiencing these difficulties.

"This is not the place to speak of this, let us move to the Council Room to discuss this further." Elsa motioned for them to follow her as she walked though the door.

Chapter 8 - The Wandering Harper

Quiltan sat in his assigned room in the palace, staring at the magic harp-wood. He had yet to string it, and didn't know if he could use ordinary strings for it or if he had to find some type of magic strings. If he needed magic strings, he had didn't know where to go for to find them and didn't know how to make them himself. He needed to do something and he had no idea how to do it. He also had to wait for Tallin to return so he could give him the Staff, so even if he figured something out, he couldn't do anything about it. He didn't have his harp to play, either, as he usually would have in this type of situation. Instead he pulled out his flute, not as soothing to his nerves, but still helpful. He played a happy tune he had learned soon after beginning his apprenticeship to put him in a better mood. Soon he was lost in the music and wasn't sure how much later it was when he was startled by a soft knock at the door.

He stopped playing and went to the door. Opening it, he was somewhat surprised to see the face of Elsa.

She smiled for a second and then let it go slowly back to the somewhat sad expression she had worn before as she spoke. "I heard the music and didn't want to disturb you, but we received some information I thought you might like to know. We know where Tallin is. The Fearie-Mage Erana came to tell us that she found him in a castle in Trassia, he had been struck with a very powerful and unknown poison. He is in a deep sleep, and will likely be in this state for a number of days while she works to get the poison out of his body. Apparently, even the little bit still left is enough to kill him, though slowly, if it is not somehow removed. The apothecary has been given a sample to see if they can identify it, but there is little hope of that. At least we know he is safe now." Looking at him, she seemed about to say more. Instead she said, "That is all," and turned around abruptly then walked away.

Quiltan watched her walk off, then closed his door and sat back down on his bed. He began to play the tune he had before, but now it seemed to have a note of sadness to it and did little to cheer him up.

* * *

Erana sat staring out the window into the fading sunlight, likely meditating, or, at least, that is how it would appear to anyone watching her. Really what she was doing was casting a very delicate time- and mana-consuming spell. She was looking into the body of Tallin, seeing the blood flow. In his deep, magic-induced "sleep" it flowed slowly, seeming not even to move at all, but she knew it was moving, bringing the poison to his brain, where it would eventually kill him. She had never seen something so powerful before, and wondered how it could be natural, though she knew it was, or how anybody could use it, seeing as how as little as a drop on an open wound would kill within hours.

Only a few small particles would still kill, though much more slowly than the large amount on the knife, and so she had to make sure she missed none, or as close to none as she could get. She had already cleansed the entry point and healed the wound through which it had come, but even as fast as she had acted, the poison had acted faster, moving through the bloodstream to its target. Now she had to search through every blood vessel, looking for the tiny, stray, deadly particles. She continued to stare at the same point through the night, then the next day and its night, too. Finally, as night was changing into day yet again, she broke her stare, nearly satisfied that she had found every single speck of the poison. She cast a spell that would check for the unknown substance in his body, and her suspicions were confirmed.

Releasing the spell of "sleep", Tallin slowly opened his eyes as his heart, lungs and other organs began to function normally again. She knew his stamina was low, as his own body had tried to fight the poison, though ineffectually. She gave him a drink that would restore his lost energy and watched as it worked and he tried to stand. Another spell held him immobile.

She gave him some food. "You need to eat this. Though you may not feel it, your body has been without food for many days. It has used itself up trying to fight the poison. I have given you a potion that will temporarily restore your energy, but you must eat to build it back up again."

* * *

Quiltan stared out the window of his room, looking over the ocean beyond. Quiltan had realized days before that he must leave, but had been putting it off for various reasons. He set down the pen and the note he had written then left the room, leaving the door open. He knew he could not wait any longer, for Tallin, or for Elsa.

Coming out of the Palace through one of the side exits, he found his way to the large spinning hat on Nob Hill, suspended by several pillars above a small platform. From asking around he had learned that this was the way to visit the Arch-mage Erasmus. Now he only had to find a way to use the thing. It was obviously magical and his eye

couldn't help but be drawn to a certain pillar. Seeing no other recourse he gave it a kick.

He saw a blue glow surround him, then felt reality bend as he was teleported to another platform, high in the clouds. Daring not to look over the edge, he carefully followed the path to the face-shaped cloud. As he neared the cloud, it spoke these words: "He that wishes to pass through me, first must answer questions three. What is your name?"

With no reason to lie, and a number of reasons not to, he answered. "Quiltan, the Harper."

"What is your quest?"

Resisting the unexplainable urge to say he sought the Holy Grail, but searching for what else to say, he recalled the Sibyl's words. "I seek the True Music."

"What is your favorite color?"

Hearing the final question, Quiltan smiled. "Blue," he replied, "Harper Blue." He remembered the beautiful wine glasses of his Master, blown with a clear bowl then welded to a blue glass stem. He had always said they were perfect for the rich red wine he loved.

"You are correct, you may pass."

The 'mouth' of the cloud opened and Quiltan walked through it. Coming through it, he found a very strange castle. Besides the fact that it was floating miles above the ground, a fact he didn't want to think about, one of the towers was suspended upside down, another appeared to be grinning at him and the largest one looked a whole lot like an ice cream cone. Walking towards the door, he knocked politely, then backed off as the two small dragons on either side of the doors, dragons which he had thought metal, pulled the chains in their mouth and the doors swung wide.

Walking through, he began to float. Dealing with this sensation, he almost didn't notice as he was greeted by a large rat, the wizard's familiar, Fenris, who asked Quiltan to follow him. He was led past a number of interesting decorations, and could have sworn a light was following him around. Finally, he came by a popcorn machine and saw one who he assumed was Erasmus, sitting in a large blue chair with yellow stars.

He introduced himself to the wizard. "Ah, so you are the Harper I have heard so much about. I would ask you to play, but it seems you don't have a functional harp, perhaps these strings will help." As Erasmus handed him the strings, they seemed to hum, even limp as they were. Quiltan didn't even want to know how the wizard knew that the harp in his case had yet to be strung, but put the strings in his case carefully, to avoid getting them tangled. "Are you ready to go, then?"

"What? Going where?"

"I thought you knew. In order to find the True Music, you must return to your Master."

This is where Quiltan had been planning on going, but to hear it confirmed was a relief. Remembering the other reason he came, he gave the staff to Erasmus to give to Tallin, with instructions about the danger posed to all souls if it fell into the wrong hands and was released. He then retold the prophecy he had received and Erasmus promised he would ponder over it. After this, Erasmus cast a spell, and he again felt reality bend around him.

When he returned to normal space, he was on a well-trod dirt path, leading through a garden tended with expert care, his Master's other delight, to a well-maintained cottage. He walked toward the cottage, his heart filled with joy. He was home.

Chapter 9 - The Lost Harper

Walking towards the cottage, he expected to see his master tending the garden, or hear the music as he entertained a group of his many visitors. But he didn't see him in the garden, and the air was as silent as he had ever heard it.

As he came up to the door, and reached for the handle, he found the door locked. This was the biggest surprise of all. Never before had his master locked his door, there hadn't even been a lock, before he left. What had happened to so change everything? Looking around he noticed that, though the garden was still in good condition, it had not recently been tended, as he had thought from a distance.

Not knowing anything else to do, he rapped loudly on the door, then again. Finally, after a few minutes, he heard a being lock undone. Then he saw an eye peering through a small crack.

Quiltan smiled broadly, then said exuberantly "Master."

The door opened a wider and he saw his master. He was a big man, though as gentle as any could be. Any who saw him would not think the music that he could produce would come from his large frame. He looked like a farmer, and indeed he loved to work in his garden, but if you looked at him you would not have noticed the deep tan farmers got from working in the sun all day. If you examined his hands, you would not have seen the calloused palms gained from working with the tools used for that profession, instead the skin thickened on the fingertips, from working with all kinds of stringed instruments. His master looked him up and down, then said tentatively, with a frown. "Quiltan?"

"Yes, don't you recognize me?"

"Of course, of course." Then he seemed to brighten up, smiling, but his eyes remained the same. "Come in, sit down, and let us talk." He didn't give him the hug, as he would have expected, nothing seemed to be the way he expected.

Quiltan followed him into the house, then found the stool he normally used and sat down. His master sat down on his own chair, and rocked back and forth a few times, before speaking.

"So, why have you returned? Do you feel you're ready to become a Master, already?" From his tone he obviously did not think this to be the case.

"No, I need to find something . . . that is, I was sent in search of something, by the Sibyl. I need to find the True Music." He was on edge. Usually nothing could faze him, but his master's change obviously had, and it showed in his words.

"And so you return to me, thinking I can help you." He took a deep breath, then continued. "You should know that I have lost my memory, or selected parts of it. I can remember nothing of the True Music, if I ever knew anything."

Quiltan sighed. His last hope had been removed, he didn't know what to do, nothing at all was how he expected. He knew things changed, but he thought his master would remain the same forever. This seemed to explain the garden and all the others changes, but nothing he knew of could explain the memory loss, and he doubted his master could tell him anything. If it was natural, there was nothing to tell, if it was forced on him unnaturally, as he suspected, then the memory of what had happened would be erased as well. Just when he was about to cry out in despair, his master spoke.

"You can look through the volumes I keep here, though." He indicated the many books, set on shelves around the room. A small hope rose again. It was a longshot, as it was unlikely, if someone was trying to balk his mission, as he thought, that they would have left an information of use to him. His master spoke again, "I'll prepare your room, now."

* * *

So, for the next few days, Quiltan remained at his master's house. It was not how he had expected it would be, instead he searched through books, rising with the dawn, reading through the daylight hours, and long into the night, by candlelight. He found much about music, but nothing about "True Music", or anything about prophecies or the "Harp". Nothing he could use.

Finally, giving up, he prepared to go back to bed, when he saw one of his old music books, from which he had learned his first basic songs. He opened it, not expecting to find anything, but as he looked through it, stuck between pages containing a song about a twinkling star and a girl and her lamb, was a page that looked like it had been ripped from some type of journal. It was in his master's practiced hand, and read:

I have watched the boy as he has excelled at all the tasks I have set him. Never have I seen one learn so quickly, going through the intermediate and master's lessons as if they were the beginner's. I continue to watch amazed, and I can only confirm that Erasmus was correct: this boy is the one prophesied, the one who will bring back the old music, the one who will play the True Music. I do not know that I am prepared...

The rest of the page had been ripped off, so the sentence was left unfinished. He doubted he would find the rest of the journal, and he didn't know if it would even tell him anything more, a man tended not to write something he would readily remember. The rest of the journal and the book with the prophecy, if there had been one, were gone with his master's memories. He would have to find the prophecy and he would not find it here. Erasmus had been mentioned, but he doubted he

was willing to tell him anymore than the little he had. This was something he had to find on his own.

He turned around to tip-toe quietly to his bed, when he noticed the shadow of his master, cast backwards from the light of his candle. His master looked sadly at him. "You're leaving, then." Quiltan nodded. "Go to Shapier, then speak with Aziza there, she will help you find what you seek." He smiled his sad smile, that did not live in his eyes, then turned and went to his bed. Quiltan continued the walk to his own, then collapsed into it.

* * *

Waking up with the sun in his eyes, he readied his few belongings and prepared to leave. His master did not appear to have awakened yet, so he grabbed a quick bite to eat, then left a note saying goodbye. As he walked away, not turning back, he did not notice the man standing at the door, a note grasped in his hand and a look of extreme sadness on his face, nor did he notice the white-bearded man wearing a purple nightshirt materialize behind him. He did not see the marvellous transformation of the garden and the door itself, as they reverted to their former states. He did not hear the wizard say, "The boy will do fine, he will do just fine." And He did not notice the smile on his master's face, glowing in his eyes, or hear his affirmative answer. "Yes, my boy has grown up."

Chapter 10 - A Glance at the Unseen

Tallin awoke again, this time to find starlight streaming over the treetops and through the windows. He tried getting up and found that he could move at last. Swinging his legs over the side of the bed, he saw a few pieces of fruit on the table beside the bed. Realizing he was hungry, he picked one up and took a large bite out of it. Finishing it off, he went off to find Erana. She was his only way off this island, and he had many things he had to do. Besides, he had to thank her.

Walking out the door he was amazed by how large the interior was compared to the rather small exterior. There was definitely magic involved. He saw Erana sitting by the small fountain, faced away from him, with her hand dragging in the water. He walked towards her.

He cleared his throat softly to let her know he was here, then started to speak, but as she turned towards him, startled, he stopped. Her eyes were red, she had been crying, a drop fell off the tip of her chin as she turned. The sound of the fountain had served to mask both his footsteps and her crying. He didn't know what to say, or what he could say, but she solved it for him. She lowered her head, then when it came up again, he would not have known she had been crying, her eyes were their normal brown. She spoke, "You wanted something?" She could not completely mask the sorrow in his voice, but he chose to ignore it, as this is what she seemed to want.

"Um, yes." He was still not quite sure what to say, so he decided to start with the obvious. "I wanted to thank you for your kindness, you have healed me and watched over me and I will not forget it, but . . . " He didn't know if he should continue.

". . . but you want to bring back your lost love." It was not a

question.

"And I have other duties, other things I must do." He still needed to speak with Elsa and the others about what he had happened to him in Mordavia, and to make sure the blackbird was safe in it's hiding place in the Palace. From what he understood it was important.

"Yes. Where is it you wish to go?"

"To the Palace first, I have a few things I need to do there."

"Rakeesh is staying there, but your father has recently left, leaving a courtier in his stead." She prepared the spell to teleport him.

Just before the spell took affect, he called "Thank you, again."

As reality warped around him, he did not see the tears resume in her eyes.

* * *

He appeared in one of the teleportation rooms in the Palace, on one of the red circles painted on the floor, warning anyone who entered this room to stay outside of it. Walking out the door, he didn't notice the shadow following him, or the one casting it, flying above. He moved down the familiar hallway and entered another room containing a single painted circle. Striding over to it, he pushed on one side of a certain board, then lifted another board, revealing a heavy metal box underneath. If you were to step on this particular board, it would not move, as any foot would be too wide. He pushed the box aside, then got down to reach into the hole, pulling out the blackbird. It had not been touched. Thinking that leaving it here was safer then bringing it with him, he returned it to it's hiding place and pushed the box back over it, shifting the dirt to remove any sign of the movement, then closing the panel.

He left this room and walked toward the guest rooms. While Elsa had probably moved into the King's quarters by now, Rakeesh would likely be staying in one of those rooms. He had meant to get him a permanent room, for when he visited, but had never got around to it. As he had walked down the hall, a transformation occurred behind him.

* * *

"I've got some . . . business to attend to. You watch the Inn for now." Ugarte said this to Nawar and then left. He knew she was quite capable of taking care of the things while he was gone, though looking at her you would not think so. People underestimated her at their own risk.

Coming out of the door, he watched as a small boat moved towards the dock. Under the cover of darkness, the boat seemed almost to blend in, and only the movement of the rower gave away its location. He walked out to meet it, and caught the rope thrown to him, tying it to a pile. The one passenger got out, having a hard time, as he was carrying something in his only arm.

"Well, did you get it?" Ugarte seemed anxious.

"Aye, I got it, mate, but if the boss knew you were looking fer this kind of thing, you'd be up to your neck in trouble. And even more from them." The "boss" he referred to was King Elsa, and the item was a book, but the knowledge was forbidden. It was from a cult long ago, that had ruled the five known kingdoms in all but name. It had appeared and disappeared long before the Cult of Amon Tillado was even heard of. Its dark power had covered the known world, and rites, unspoken, were rumored to be worse than even that dread cult of Mordavia. They called themselves "The Servants of Life", but were better known, through whispers in the shadows, as the "Cult of Death", for this is what they served, and the secrets of that final mystery they longed to possess.

Four out of the five Great Kingdoms still existed, though in a much changed form, and a new kingdom had arisen, since, and another threatened to arise. And all of them still dreaded the dark shadow of this cult, for though the cult had faded from view, thousands of years past, people still feared a resurgence, as elements of it were rumored to still exist.

The book he held was banned, and would be burned in holy fire by any who knew of its true knowledge. Or if the cult, the "them" Arestes spoke of, knew of it, they would kill anyone who had laid hands on their most sacred book, roughly translated to "The Book of Death". He had obtained it, not for himself, but because another had asked for it. One who had the power and wished to study all knowledge, both accepted and forbidden, and who had asked specifically for this book. He would pay handsomely for it, and more importantly, his favor would be upon Ugarte for finding this treasure.

"And I got ya the other thing, too." He handed him a bouquet of flowers, carefully maintained in a spellbound wrap. These only grew on the island of Spetsai, and could almost never be taken from there, as they were maintained by the magic soil there, and without some other form of magic to maintain them, would wilt in a matter of minutes. They were also Nawar's favorite flower. He took both, then told them when and where to pick up their payment.

He dropped the book in the special pouch he had received, and felt as the weight abruptly disappeared, the book supposedly appearing in its companion pouch, in the hands of the wizard. He then walked into the Inn, and found a commotion he had not expected. A man was shouting at Nawar, calling her all kinds of names that no man should ever call a woman.

Ugarte walked over to them, dropping the flowers in his anger. "Get out, now." he said to the man, with an authority he had never possessed before, a knife ready, and guards nearby, should he resist. The man, seeing no other recourse, complied, sending a final nasty curse at both of them, and crushing the flowers Ugarte had dropped under a booted foot. "Everyone else, leave, too. The Inn is closed. Anyone not out in five minutes, who is not drunk off their feet, will be permanently banned from the Inn, as that one is." He said this, indicated the retreating man with the point of his knife. He could enforce it, too. Abdim and his brothers may not be high on brains, but they knew how to distinguish one person from another.

He turned to Nawar. She was not crying, as some women might, but

instead seemed to be slightly angry at him, though also slightly amused. "I could have handled him myself, but I thank you for your help. I like a man who knows how to get what he wants." She paused to let any underlying meanings sink in. "We're those for me?" She indicated the crushed bouquet.

He picked them up, the flowers falling off the end of the stems. "Yes, I had them specially obtained because I knew they were your favorite." He was somewhat nervous, not knowing how she would react. Luckily, the bartender, Budar, was busy cleaning up, so she didn't hear any of this.

"Mmm, a man who goes out of his way to please me, I could get used to that." She seemed very pleased.

* * *

Erasmus looked over the book he had received. It dated back to the time of the five Great Kingdoms. The Kingdom of Atlantis, which had once covered the entire island of Marete, and far into the mainland, its economic power travelling even beyond that, was all but destroyed by the Dragon of Doom. The beautiful capital, largely wreckage, sunk under the waves, and was thereafter populated by its transformed inhabitants, half man, half fish: The Tritons. While its power on the mainland faded, splitting into various factions, all trying to restore its former brilliance under their rule, the people from the other isles gathered together to build a new capital. It was a piteous excuse, when compared to the splendour of Atlantis. They named it Silmaria, and that is how the kingdom came to be known.

Then there was the Empire of Trassia, though still large, now much reduced, to only half its former glory. It had once covered nearly an entire continent, with more land than any other had held then or since. Its decline had been slow, as compared to Atlantis, as rulers, secure in their power, and with less wisdom than their ancestors, had allowed smaller kingdoms to dribble away slowly, over these many years.

Then there was the great Kingdom of Tarna, said to have once contained the most honorable of Kings, and nearly as wise as they were honorable. This kingdom was betrayed by internal strife, some say fed by an external source, originating in another world. It had faded to but two cities. Comparatively recently, one of the twin cities had been lost, and to the same external source that had been rumored to have caused the Kingdom's decline.

The final Kingdom still existing today in some form, is Shapier. Much smaller and seemingly weaker than any of the others, its power existed in its strong magic and wise rulers, the wisest any had known. It is the only Kingdom that remains much the same today as it did then. Though still just two cities, it had been lucky, or perhaps it had been more than luck, to maintain a line of wise rulers, culminating in the current one, Harun al-Rashid, who is said to be wiser than the wisest rulers of old.

The final kingdom and perhaps the greatest of all, Cartage, had been the origin of the cult, and when the cult was destroyed, it had been, too. When the leader of the cult publicly declared rulership over Cartage, the other nations had thrown off the cult's oppression and

banded together with an army larger than any ever seen. Seeing the collapse of the cult's power, the leader called on all the forbidden knowledge, sucking the life out of every man, woman and child in the entire kingdom. It gave that leader a type of near immortality, but at a cost unknown and unforeseen. After this, the army disbanded, never having fought. The buildings of the kingdom remained intact, but no one would enter them, for fear of death or worse, and all but the largest and sturdiest have eventually crumbled to dust under the erosion of millennia.

As Erasmus recalled this information, he prepared a spell that would guard him and others from any curses placed upon the book. Then he opened it.

* * *

Quiltan was just about ready to sleep for the night, as soon as he found a nice place to build a fire and set out his blanket roll, when he was confronted by a loud growl to his right and then another to his left. He knew that he would be set upon by monsters in a matter of seconds. He had never encountered any before, as he had always travelled in large groups, or more recently teleported from place to place, but he had his dagger and he knew basically how to use it. He then remembered his master's words, that a true harper would not need any weapon except his music, but he found that harder to credit now more than ever. He readied his dagger as a pair of what looked like a cross between a pig and a man came out of the trees beside the road. They had likely been stalking him for some time. He got a sinking feeling in his stomach. He was going to die.

As one made a clumsy lunge at him, he made an equally clumsy dodge, then swung his dagger at the snouted biped and drew some blood, causing him to withdraw for a second. He thought he saw a small patch of blackness, covering some stars for a second, but he didn't dwell on that as the second pigface closed in. He was just about to thrust the dagger at him, when a surprised look appeared on his face, and Quiltan noticed two daggers sticking out of him, one through his throat and one through his heart. Then he collapsed, dead, his eyes glazed, but not before the other was on his way to a similar condition.

Quiltan turned around to see his savior, and was confronted with a boy no more than sixteen. He stuck out his hand. "Thanks, I probably would have been dead in a few seconds if not for you. I'm Quiltan, what's your name?"

He all but ignored him as he retrieved his daggers and cleaned them on the grass beside the road. "It was nothing, really. These are boarmen, not much of a challenge to anyone with any weapons experience. Now we better get moving before more show up. There's a town about a quarter mile ahead." He put action to words and started walking at a quick pace. Before Quiltan could again ask his name, he stated. "I'm Salak, by the way."

Chapter 11 - A Turn for the Worse

Tallin knocked on the door to Rakeesh's room, knowing his friend would not mind the late night wake up, if he was even asleep. Rakeesh seemed to be up at all hours, and Tallin sometimes wondered how he managed it. He himself had often gone without sleep for a few nights,

but couldn't survive for long that way. He was at the door within minutes, fully alert, and had likely been in the middle of some form of meditation.

"You have changed much since we last met, my friend. You have proven the promise that I had seen in you, and have become the Paladin I knew you could. Come in, there are many things we must speak of."

Rakeesh filled him in on the council's decisions. Three of the Great Kingdoms were preparing for war. The fourth, Mergnay, to which the barony of Spielburg belonged, did not believe there was any danger from the Empire of Trassia. It did not matter much, Mergnay was still a small kingdom, though much larger than others claiming that title, since the original five. While it was true it had been declared the sixth "Great" Kingdom, its glory was barbaric compared to what the others had once been, and as nothing compared to what Cartage is said to have been.

Then he told him that Erasmus was worried, he said that he had been studying prophecies, including a new one given him by the harper, Quiltan. He connected this prophecy with another which seemed to say that unless the six Great Kingdoms united as one, the "Great Evil" would overtake the entire world. When it had been found, in a ruined building in Cartage, that a brave, or, more likely, foolish man had found, likely searching for treasure among the crumbling ruins. Scholars had dismissed it as a fake. Besides a number of other inconsistencies, there were only five Great Kingdoms, and Cartage was now gone. Reviewing it, Erasmus was not so sure. He told Tallin he should visit Erasmus in the morning.

Then they went on to discuss his Paladin abilities, and Rakeesh offered him Soulforge. Tallin declined, citing the reason he had given Erana, and he moved onto other matters. As the morning light shone through the window, Tallin left to visit Erasmus.

* * *

Quiltan woke up in the stable they had been forced to board in, the sunlight slanting through the rafters. He was glad it hadn't rained, for there was no way the roof would have kept the water out. Also, the straw on the floor seemed to have been changed recently, though no animals currently resided in any of the stalls.

Stretching, he got up and splashed his face with water from a barrel near the entrance. Salak was gone, he had probably woken earlier and moved on. He had not seemed anxious to stay in the town long.

He went over to the tavern, attached to the inn. Open in the morning to serve hot food to the local clientele, mostly miners who worked the nearby mountains. It was nearly empty, everybody had already left for work. He was able to get some food leftover from the morning meal. It was tinted green, with flecks of red, but it didn't taste that bad. He was about to ask the short-tempered barmaid what it was, but then realized he preferred not to know.

He settled his bill, replenishing his store of road rations, then left the inn. As he walked out, he noticed a shifty-eyed man loitering in the alley across the street. He wondered what business he could have there, but decided it wouldn't be smart to ask him.

Instead he continued on, hoping he could make some money with his flute or his voice and buy a horse at some point. He did not want to use his newly strung Harp for something like that, it didn't seem right somehow.

* * *

Tallin stood on the platform and triggered the spinning hat, then walked to the cloud. It spoke:

"The Wizard is expecting you." Then it opened its "mouth".

Tallin walked through, and then up to the door. He knocked, and watched as the doors were pulled open wide. He swam over to where Erasmus was sitting, by the popcorn machine.

"Ah, I'm glad you made it, dear boy. I have been doing some studying recently, and it seems we will be needing your skills again in the near future. A great evil, or, more accurately, the Great Evil is soon to overtake this world, and there is only one way to stop it:

"Evil will arise, and Death cannot touch it, When it comes, and casts off its guise. Then the Hero, known in five Kingdoms, Yet coming from none, could betray or save all. _

_ "Another, the Musicmaker, who finds the True Music, And One, of the Great Kingdom, Brings despair to the wise. _

_ "Bringing back from the grave the one he once loved, The Hero must join with those of the six Kingdoms, Uniting as one, to bring Evil to Death. _

_ "The Harp is the key, in the hands of the One."_

"Allow me to explain this, or at least what I understand. You are the Hero, for though you were raised in a village to the east of Spielberg, you were not born there. I know this because I found you while scrying throughout the unknown areas, locked in the embrace of one I can only assume was your mother. She seemed to be running from something, but I do not know from what. When I teleported there, she all but threw you into my arms, begging me to take care of you between shallow breaths. Then she collapsed, dead. She had worn herself out trying to save you.

"The Great Kingdom I assume is Cartage, for that is what it was often known as..."

"But Cartage is gone, totally destroyed eons ago!" Tallin interrupted.

"Yes, that does present a problem, but not as much as do a number of other things from this prophecy. For instance, how will we get the six Kingdoms to join when Trassia is against us, Mergnay doesn't believe it and Cartage does not exist? And what is the Harp the key to?

"The 'Musicmaker' is Quiltan, he is already searching. The 'One', I believe, is the leader of the Cult of Death, who gained near immortality at the cost of a soul. This leader will indeed bring

"despair to the wise", but I do not know how he will gain the Harp, for that Quiltan has that. All in all, though, this prophecy does not bode well for Gloriana."

* * *

Walking down the dirt road, later in the day, Quiltan heard a cart approaching and moved off to the side as it came down the road. The farmer slowed, asking him if he wanted a ride. He didn't know what a farmer was doing here, as he had seen neither farms nor towns since leaving the mining town this morning, but, as he was anxious for a ride of any type, he didn't really care. He climbed up in the seat and off they went.

Quiltan was quite tired from the day's walk and began to doze off, the cart seeming to rock him to sleep. Meanwhile, the landscape seemed to transform around them, changing from a dusty road, lined with pine trees, to a muddy track, weaving through a deciduous forest, boughs blocking the sunlight above. They ended up near a country estate, well cared for, a small piece of civilization in the midst of pure nature.

Coming up to the door, a number of people helped carry the harper into the house, and placed him on a large stone slab, a piece of the earth itself in the middle of this piece of civilization. This chore attended to, they moved on.

Chapter 12 - Wizards and Whisperings

As Tallin absorbed the information that Erasmus gave him, he noticed something out of place.

"Erasmus, where is Fenris?"

"What . . . oh, uh, right. Well, actually I don't know, he went out this morning, and I haven't seen him since, probably went to one of his RABID meetings. But, now that you mention it, he has been disappearing more frequently of late. I wonder if he's two-timing me for another Wizard." Erasmus seemed greatly disturbed at this thought.

Tallin didn't think it was anything of that sort, but he wondered what could be taking Fenris away from his friend. His mind quickly returned to why he had come here, though. "I need to speak with Quiltan, and Rakeesh said that you knew where to find him."

Erasmus seemed a bit distracted, but he managed to respond. "Oh, Quiltan, I sent him . . . somewhere. I forget, now." Then he seemed to remember something. "He did leave this staff for you, though." The Staff of the Guardian materialized in the air, then floated over to the hero.

"Thanks, Erasmus. One other thing, would you mind teleporting me to Abanasia? I have something to do there."

"Quite right, I would expect you would with all the evil floating around that area."

Before Tallin could ask about the evil Erasmus spoke of, reality was bending around him, the telltale mark of magic teleportation.

Erasmus was just about to return to his studying when something else came to mind. "Wasn't I supposed to tell him something else? Oh, no matter, it couldn't have been that important, and I'm sure he'll figure it out."

* * *

Quiltan awoke to more pain than he had ever imagined possible. Every part of his body felt like it was switching from fire to ice and then back again, he wanted to writhe in agony, but he found he couldn't move. Just when he thought he couldn't stand it any longer, it stopped. A voice came out of the blackness around him.

"Did you that too much pain without relief can drive you mad?"

Another voice.

"Normally, a person's body would shut down when the pain was too great, and thus protect the brain."

Another voice. It seemed he was surrounded by a committee.

"But we have stopped that function for now. We could continue inflicting pain until you cannot stand it anymore."

Another voice.

"We can also affect other areas of the brain."

Quiltan found himself on an island of rock in the middle of a lake of fire. From the descriptions he knew, he assumed this was the Demon Realm. A voice seemed to come from the sky.

"All in all, we can make an extremely unpleasant time for you."

He felt water rain down on him. Then another voice spoke.

"If you do not tell us what we wish to know, you will find out what true pain is."

Another voice.

"And then you will die."

The voices disappeared and Quiltan fell into relieving unconsciousness.

* * *

Tallin found himself in Abanasia, and he knew he was on the street leading to where he wanted to go. He wondered how Erasmus had known, or if he had just set him here randomly. He didn't know what the evil Erasmus spoke of was, and he didn't want to think about it, he had a mission he had waited too long to complete. He would save Katrina, but first he needed to go to WIT.

Walking to down the street he was confronted with the ramshackle hut

he saw when he first came here. He had certainly not been expecting that, but he should have. He knocked on the door. Instead of the immediate reply he was used to, it was a few seconds before an answer came. Just before it did, he felt a tingling sense of danger, but dismissed it, as it quickly dissipated.

"Come in."

He carefully opened the badly hung door and walked inside.

"Ah, so you have the staff. Well, then, I'd best get you to your destination. But first..."

She performed a spell with her hands, then spoke again in a no-nonsense voice.

"I have given you a spell that will allow you to quickly absorb all knowledge you hear and read. You will amaze these wizards of no account with your quick learning skills. You will find the way to travel to the Underworld, then return with your love to give me the Staff." She almost seemed she sneered on the word 'love'.

He didn't feel the bending of reality he normally felt when teleporting, he simply found himself in the hall at WIT, pictures of famous wizards on the walls across the short gap from the path he was on.

He heard the voice of the Earth Wizard.

"So, you have returned, impetuous one."

Then the Fire Wizard spoke.

"Have you finally curbed your heroic tendencies?"

The Water Wizard next.

"You could learn much if you would simply try."

Finally the Air Wizard.

"We will teach you if you are ready. Are you ready?"

Tallin spoke up. "I am ready."

He felt reality bend and found himself instantly transported to another room, filled with books.

* * *

Here ends Part II: "The Harper's Quest", the story will continue in Part III (unnamed, as yet).

End
file.